

Watch Yourself on the Down

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On any given day at sea, one can hear over the ship's 1MC, "Medical alert! Medical alert! Medical alert in compartment one-tack-eighty-one-tack-one-tack-lima." You stop what you're doing as the announcement is repeated, to make sure you got it right. Then you quickly run down a mental list of your squadron spaces and hope the medical emergency didn't involve any of your Sailors. If someone was injured, you hope it was only slightly.

How often aboard ship have those medical emergencies been called away for a Sailor who had fallen down a ladder? My squadron participated in a fleet exercise aboard USS *Carl Vinson*, and, during the short month we were aboard, three Sailors fell down ladders and were injured.

My squadron—like the ship and other embarked units—had a large personnel turnover during the preceding six months. Many crew members never had been aboard ship or out to sea. They quickly had to learn how to move about the ship to do their work and missed the luxury of an extensive shipboard orientation period before getting underway. Although the chain of command strives to prepare the crew for sea, something as simple as using a ladder can become a bone-breaking experience if Sailors do not follow safety precautions. After one of our Sailors tumbled down a ladder outside a squadron workspace, I decided to gather ladder-injury statistics from the ship's safety office. The period covered was from Jan. 1, 2001, through May 18, 2001.

There were 20 ladder-related injuries, three of which were from our squadron. Fourteen of the 20

mishaps resulted from people falling down ladders. Those falls included five leg, three ankle, two knee, two finger, one abdomen, and one foot injuries. The other six injuries were sustained when crew members struck their heads on hatches or against equipment while falling down ladders. Of these six injuries, five involved head lacerations. When these falls occur, Sailors lose man-hours while being treated and when healing. As a matter of fact, my information indicated the medical trauma accounted for over 570 lost man-hours.

As a 20-year Navy veteran, I no longer have my younger cat-like agility, especially when using shipboard ladders. I tend to take my time to safely go up or down ladders. However, younger Sailors have other ideas when they use ladders. They slide down handrails without their feet ever really touching the steps, or they use every third step to descend. A trip up the ladder is done almost as fast, with Sailors taking as many as three steps at a time. Even though they're familiar with a ladder and can move very quickly, these young Sailors forget the dangers of incorrectly using ladders.

A ladder's material condition also can increase the potential for injury. Below are points to consider when determining the safety of any ladder's material condition:

- Make sure ladder steps are clean and free of grease build-up or corrosion.
- Check the ladder for worn or poorly adjusted steps. Worn steps can develop into slip hazards. If steps are worn and replacements are not available, reverse the tread to expose the unworn rear edge as a temporary repair.



The photo above shows how Sailors often travel part, or all, of the way up or down a shipboard ladder while holding onto only one handrail—grab both when using a ladder!

- Make sure three non-skid strips are placed on the approach and on the landing of each ladder.
- Make sure all ladder pins are in place and secure.
- Ladder railings should be smooth and not “burred” by misuse. Burred rails can cause injury to hands and fingers.
- Missing railing hardware can make ladders unstable and cause imbalance during transit.
- Ladders should be marked with photo-luminescent strips.

We should realize that as long as there are ladders aboard ship, there is injury potential. If you see people unsafely using a ladder, stop and correct them immediately. Hold periodic workcenter training on the dangers. Report neglected ladders and quickly fix or secure them.

These are just a few ways that might prevent the next afloat “down ladder” statistic. Maybe the next time a medical alert is called away, it won’t be for some injured Sailor found at the bottom of a “down ladder.” ☹️